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ABSTRACT

This paper considers U.S. immigration in terms of this country's fertility, mortality, and migration rates and patterns. Statistics and estimates are provided for both legal and illegal immigrants, and the positive and negative effects of population growth and decline are explored. The paper concludes that rising immigration rates will help balance low U.S. fertility rates but that an increase in immigration may also lead to overpopulation problems in the next 100 years. Immigration policies, based on considerations of future U.S. social and economic needs and requirements, should be established. (JHP)

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by

Leon Bouvier

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WILL THERE BE ENOUGH AMERICANS?

By Leon Bouvier

Introduction: The Fear of Population Decrease -- Twenty-five years ago most Americans who thought about the population future would have been concerned about explosive population growth. World population was growing at well over 2 percent per year, enough to double global numbers in less than thirty-five years. The population of the United States was increasing at a rate we now associate with the Third World, one that would have yielded well over 400 million inhabitants by 2050. Many concluded that the United States was growing too fast. Mortality was low and immigration moderate, but fertility was high. Consequently, the goal of zero population growth gained acceptance, and "2.1" (the number of live births per woman needed to replace the population in the long run in the absence of immigration) became the touchstone for a sound population strategy.

In the intervening quarter century our perceptions of our population future have turned about. From its baby boom peak of 3.7 in 1957, U.S. fertility fell below the magic "2.1" threshold, reaching 1.8 in 1972. Baby boom has given way to baby bust. Even though the country has added 54 million people in the last two decades, a new and unfamiliar fear now troubles some Americans: population decline. Is the new fear justified?

Our Shifting Demographic Behavior -- The reversal in our population concerns mirrors the striking shifts in our demographic behavior as a nation over the past 20 years. Just as all of us speak "prose" without trying, so do all of us "behave demographically." The demographic behavior of millions of individual Americans -- moving, marrying, giving birth, dying -- adds up to major variations in population growth over time. Fertility, mortality or migration are the key population variables shaped by millions of individual demographic acts.

Mortality, while the final individual demographic act, is the least significant as well as the least controversial. Policy debates rage over whether to encourage or discourage the other two demographic variables, fertility or immigration, but ever lower mortality has near unanimous political support. Over the past 20 years, life expectancy has continued to increase for all

Americans. We must be doing something right! Modern medical wonders and our growing concern with diet, smoking and exercise are paying off in longer lives for all of us. But the overall demographic impact is slight. While today's health successes will increase the number of elderly in future years, lower mortality's contribution to total population growth is modest compared to that of fertility and migration.

Low Fertility But Substantial Growth -- The steepness of the fall in fertility from its 3.7 peak in the late 1950s surprised most demographers. Even though few signs point to an upswing in fertility in the near future, the overall number of births has been climbing. Less than a decade ago in 1978, only 3.1 million births were recorded. In 1986 births numbered over 3.7 million. At work here is the momentum imparted by the baby boom. American women now in their prime child-bearing years are from the baby boom generation. A large number of potential mothers produce many births regardless of an average fertility of only 1.8. Any decline in overall births will not occur until the middle of the 1990s.

The current baby bust has no parallel. Never before in American history has fertility been so low for so long. The transition from the fecund fifties to the sparing seventies and eighties is making itself felt in the nation's institutions. The reverberations the baby boom and baby bust have struck in the population age structure will echo for many more decades before subsiding around 2050.

The Twenty-Year Immigration Surge -- The surge of immigration that began around 1968 was as unexpected as the drop in fertility. Immigration was moderate for 20 years after World War II, with legal admissions seldom reaching 300,000 per year. Change came with the 1965 amendments to the immigration law. During the 1970s average legal immigration reached 400,000 a year and by 1985 nearly 600,000 were entering the country legally every year. The immigration reforms of 1986, which offer legalization to as many as four million people, will further increase the numbers of new residents. With large-scale legalizations and the continued strong pull of family reunification, legal immigration could approach one million a year in a decade.

Then there are the untold hundreds of thousands who enter the country illegally. Not surprisingly, illegal immigrants are hard to count. The Census Bureau has estimated their number grows by between 100,000 and 300,000 annually. A 1986 Census survey showed the foreign born population of the United States increased by 4.4 million between 1980 and 1986, or a net immigration of more than 730,000 yearly. Depending on estimates of illegal flows, immigration accounted for one-third to one-half of our annual population growth. Regardless of the totals, those who fret about low fertility have tended to discount the demographic force of immigration or underestimate its numbers. Whether the 1986 reform legislation will lead to sharp reductions in

clandestine entries depends on the nation's unpredictable will to enforce it.

Not only has the number of immigrants ballooned, they now come from different countries than did earlier newcomers. Until the post World War II period, most immigrants came from Europe. Now over 80 percent come from either Asia or Latin America and the Caribbean. The heavy influx of generally younger, non-western, non-English speaking newcomers at a time of low fertility presents special challenges of accomodation and assimilation, particularly for such youth-focussed institutions as the schools.

The combination of declining mortality and fertility and high immigration has wrought vast changes in the nation's demographic profile. Even with fertility below replacement, the U.S. population growth rate is among the highest of any developed country -- almost 1 percent per year. At the same time, the proportion of elderly in the population increases rapidly. By 2030 it is likely that at least 20 percent of Americans will be over 65, compared to about 12 percent today. Finally, the nation is becoming more ethnically diverse. Today, about 80 percent of U.S. residents are Non-Hispanic Whites, or "Anglos." That share could be reduced to 50 percent within a century if current trends continue.

Changing Worries -- From Too Many to Too Few -- Widespread worries about overpopulation 20 years ago sparked movements to cope with it. Similarly, today's perception are mobilizing some groups to address low fertility.

They warn of population decrease in the near future and the problems it might bring: a dilution of U.S. and western influence; weakened military and industrial power; loss of economic vigor; and the peculiar problems of a society with a large proportion of elderly. Only a prompt rise in fertility supplemented by increased immigration, they argue, will prevent the nation from fast becoming a second-class society.

Are we facing a new population problem in the United States? Will there be enough Americans?

A population problem can only be defined in terms of accepted population goals, something for which a consensus has been missing in the United States, where population policy is almost a dirty word. Some feel that the current U.S. population of 244 million is already too large. Others see no limit to the numbers the nation can accommodate. Economists attuned to the driving power of aggregate demand point out that more people mean more consumption, whether food, shelter, clothing or luxuries, and more consumption means more jobs. Others contend that international power and prestige require a large population. Still others see a potential for greater creativity and productivity in the "critical mass" of large populations. The cogency of these views rests ultimately on subjective judgements of what's important for the United States. The economic dimension of society is

not identical with quality of life. International power and influence do not always translate into healthier happier citizens. In any event the linkage between population size and power is tenuous at best as the rising influence of Japan suggests. The United States population is diminishing as a percentage of the world's total -- some pronalists note correctly -- from 4.9 percent now to 4.3 percent in 2000 to a minuscule 2.9 percent in the year 2100. But to maintain its current modest share of world population to the year 2100 the United States would have to more than double its present numbers to 515 million.

While more jobs may mean more automobiles, they in turn mean more roads to be built, more traffic congestion and more pollution. More people may seem economically advantageous; yet more people also contribute to increased crowding and consumption. Most Americans would agree that we do not need more shortages of landfill for waste disposal or homeless garbage barges. By any balanced standards, the overall quality of life would seem to gain, not lose, from an end to population growth in the near future. Accepting the present built-in momentum for further growth, a realistic and ecologically defensible limit to U.S. population growth would be attainable somewhere between 275 million and 300 million.

The Missing Evidence for Population Decline -- Assessments of future population must necessarily weigh the demographic variables: mortality, fertility, migration. Looking at any one in isolation from the others is self-defeating. Let us examine some projections for future U.S. population that use approximately the following demographic assumptions: a total fertility rate of about 1.8 live births per woman; life expectancy of about 74 years at birth; and net immigration (legal and illegal) of 500,000 to 800,000 a year.

-- Demographer, Thomas Espenshade, in a special 1986 issue of Population and Development Review, using the fertility and mortality assumptions cited above but with net immigration limited to 560,000 per year, finds that the population would peak at 281 million in 2025 before beginning a very gradual decline. A century from now the United States would have a population of 258 million -- 30 million greater than it had in 1980.

-- Population expert, Ansley Coale produced similar projections in 1986: With fertility remaining at its current level, and with annual immigration of 700,000, the population in 2100 would be 13 percent greater than it was in 1980 (or about 255 million). Coale calculates how much immigration would be required for the population in 2100 to equal that of 1980: if fertility remains at 1.8, net immigration of 464,000 per year would be needed.

-- In a 1982 study for the Population Reference Bureau, the author and Cary Davis built in trend lines of

fertility for each U.S. social group and projected population according to different assumptions about net immigration. At the lowest assumed level of net immigration, 500,000 a year -- less than the current intake of legal immigration alone -- the United States in 2080 would still have 33 million people more than in 1980. At one million immigrants a year -- a plausible assumption in light of current world population growth -- the United States would have 340 million in 2080.

Espenshade's and Coale's studies look at stable models. They do not allow for the possible higher fertility of immigrants. Yet all these conservative projections clearly conclude that the nation is not about to lose population, at least not for the next century. Seen from the perspective of our low fertility, these conclusions may surprise some. Reinforcing immigration's contribution to the numbers is the momentum for growth imparted by the baby boom. Demographer Peter Morrison has characterized this momentum as a "protective mantle of natural increase" in the U.S. demographic picture.

What would be the population consequences if campaigns to raise fertility were to succeed?

-- If fertility rose only to the replacement level (that is, just under 2.1) and immigration remained at 700,000 per year, in 2100 the U.S. population would approach 400 million with continuing growth of about 1 percent per year.

-- If fertility were to rise above the replacement level and if immigration stays at its present high levels, a population of half a billion Americans is certainly conceivable within the next century. Even with fertility constant at 1.8, with one million immigrants per year, the 340 million mark would be reached in 2080, with growth continuing.

Does the United States Have a Population Problem? -- If we accept 275-300 million as the range of maximum desirable growth, clearly we have no population growth problem if fertility remains at current levels and if immigration is reduced. As for population decline, there is little evidence that we can expect it over the next century. Instead, the signs point to more Americans than ever. There are few grounds for troubling ourselves with the demographic complications Americans will face a century from now. Few Americans of 1887 were concerned with ours!

Population decrease -- a problem or a benefit depending on your perspective -- could come about only if fertility remained low and net immigration fell to zero. Even under such conditions, our numbers would still increase for several decades because of the baby boom momentum. It would be 2040 before the nation's population fell once again to its level of 1980. By 2100 it would be down to 170 million and falling fairly rapidly.

A momentum for population decline would become apparent sometime after the turn of the century when the prospective mothers of that era would be those born in the baby bust period. Very few mothers would have very few children. Momentum for decline -- what some call "free fall" -- could be as awesome as momentum for growth.

Immigration Serving Demographic Needs -- Worth restressing is that all demographic variables must be examined when considering future population changes in the United States. Mortality is the politically unvariable variable. But if we accept that there should be limits to the eventual size of the U.S. population, whether 275 million to 300 million as we have suggested or lower or higher than that, we must have an appropriate balance between fertility and immigration.

Advocates of much lower immigration who also favor population stability must be aware that some immigration is needed to compensate for the low fertility of Americans. But if our intended peak is in the 275-300 million range, immigration should be sharply reduced from its current levels.

Those fearful of the effects of low fertility should look to immigration for reassurance. The evidence is clear that the population of the United States does not face decline, at least not during the lives of our children and grandchildren. Worth noting again is that even a slight increase in fertility to the two-child family would yield a gain of some 160 million inhabitants over the next 113 years. Growth of that magnitude stemming from seemingly modest gains in fertility, would require profound adjustments in the quality of American social and economic life.

Good fortune has consistently smiled on the United States. Because of accidents of geography or history or because of the resourcefulness of its people, the nation has prospered. Two hundred years of high immigration are testimony that the United States is the envy of much of the world. As we approach the 21st century, we are once again fortunate, this time demographically. While some other developed countries may trouble themselves over low fertility and imminent population decline, we can rest easy under the "protective mantle of natural increase," left by our prolonged baby boom and secure in the knowledge that we are the preferred destination of millions of hopeful migrants. By applying rational immigration policies, we can select the proper number of immigrants to balance our low fertility while enriching our economy and culture. Our challenge then is not one of simply increasing raw numbers, but of careful selection and assimilation of culturally diverse newcomers that will enhance American social and economic life.